

Salvation: Here A Little; There A Little Are There Exceptions?

Introduction

In our studies, we have learned how that virtually every apostolic, New Testament preacher taught a four-part plan of salvation: belief in Jesus Christ as Savior, repentance, water baptism in the name of Jesus, and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. Such was the original message of the first church that Jesus Christ established and such should be the message of any church today; it is this apostolic message that we aim to unerringly preach without wavering and that we must believe and obey.

But if such a message is truth, then what about those in the wild jungles somewhere who never had an opportunity to hear the Gospel? Are they automatically lost or will God make an exception to let them make it to eternal life? What of those who have received the Holy Spirit and are never baptized? What of those great men of history who did great things in bringing us from the oppressive rule of Roman Catholicism and yet never fully embraced all of these tenants? What of ministers who do great miracles in the name of Jesus and yet have not fully obeyed the Gospel? What of the children and infants that die before ever having a chance to have faith for themselves; what happens to them? What of the mentally handicapped who do not understand or cannot understand? What of the multitudes of people who profess Christ as their Savior and yet do not fully obey what the Word of God has commanded them to do in these areas or do not believe this apostolic message? If you have ever asked or been asked these questions, then this study is for you.

Are there exceptions? I do not believe that there are and I believe that scripture answers most of these questions that we have posed. But before we get to those answers, we must realize that even if there were exceptions to the plan of salvation of God, you and I that are perusing this lesson are not the exceptions. We have heard and seen the truth of God's Word. The Bible says:

Even if there were exceptions, you and I know too much to be among them!

Heb 2:3-4 how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, 4 while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

All of us have the Word of God readily available to read or be taught to us. All of us have heard enough preaching on such matters to save the world and enough teaching that we certainly are responsible for what we have heard. Furthermore, most of us have seen the demonstration of the Holy Spirit and various spiritual signs and wonders. I do not believe that there are exceptions to God's plan of salvation under Grace, but even if there were exceptions, you and I know too much to be among them! How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

Some Basic Principles

Let's begin with some basic principles that must be kept in mind while answering what some consider "hard questions." First,

God alone is the Judge of salvation and He has not given that power to men.

2 Tim 4:1 I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom:

God has not given us or any other man the ability to put someone into heaven or hell. We must at all times remember that we are not to be the judge of others. The Bible teaches that God is sovereign:

Rom 9:15-16 For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." 16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

Written by R. Jeremiah Sibley, all rights reserved.

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We must understand that our responsibility is to preach and believe truth and to not compromise on what God's Word has said. He is sovereign, but that also means that God has the right to establish a plan of salvation and from all indications, He has done so in His Word. If we neglect His clear instruction, then who are we to charge Him with unfairness?

I have repeatedly used the analogy of a fire man coming to save a person from a burning building with a ladder truck and trying to get the person to climb out the window. If the person turns and runs into the burning building and perishes because they rejected the way of salvation afforded them, then we do not blame the fireman who provided the way of escape, but their demise is a direct result of their neglecting the salvation offered to them. In the same way, God does not send anyone to hell, although He could because He is God, but rather people will go to hell because they chose to ignore or put off or turn from the way of salvation that He afforded them. Whether people go to heaven or hell, will be a direct result of choices that they make in life; nobody goes to either one by accident.

God is the most loving, merciful, and fair judge anyone could have.

Gen 18:25b Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"

Certainly God will do what is fair and we should trust His judgment. In the end, every person will spend eternity as they have been righteously deemed to go. This scripture is a double-edged sword, though, because a judge that lets evil off the hook is not a just judge, therefore God will judge accordingly in every case whether for good or bad.

Furthermore, we cannot pronounce someone as saved or lost because we do not know as God all things. We can testify if we have seen that a person has obeyed the Gospel of Jesus Christ and certainly that is a good testimony, but even then we do not see the secret parts of their heart or know everything about them. In the same manner, we may not have seen a person obey all areas of scripture, but it could have been at a time when we were not around. Because we do not know all things, we are not fit to judge righteously and therefore should refrain from doing so!

Every once in a while when someone passes away, I have a relative come to me and say, "were they lost?" The answer I give is that "I do not know because I do not see as God and only God knows if they obeyed and were faithful and right with Him in the end. I am not the judge, but remember that you are not either and therefore neither you nor I can put them in either eternal destination – it is not our place or prerogative to do so." God is the judge, and He will do what is right.

The Bible is the sole authority on salvation.

2 Tim 3:14-17 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. NIV

The God that is just has given us the clear directives and conditions by which He will one day judge us by writing them in His Word. These scriptures are "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." In these verses, we find all the answers and commandments that we need to have and obey to get to eternal life. We must avoid at all costs non-Biblical exceptions or scenarios and we must base our doctrine solely upon the written Word of God. It alone has the final say in every area of living for God. Hypothetical situations do not change the truth of God's Word. Whereas we are not to judge others, we are to judge ourselves whether or not we have done all that the Bible commands.

This gives us an answer to the false doctrines of purgatory and second chances at salvation after death. There is absolutely no scriptural support for such teachings, therefore we must reject them. A "what if" preponderance is not enough to establish truth.

Furthermore, we must stick to the Bible's teaching even if the vast majority of people reject it. The scripture says:

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Rom 3:3-4 What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? **4** By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged."

Those who do not believe do not nullify the truth of God's clear teaching! If you want to stand in the final judgment and be saved, then obey God's Word and you have no worries. But to those who would try to explain away or use hypothetical situations to reason away the commandments of scripture, you should fear because you will not be judged by your reasoning or man's philosophy but by the written Word of God!

With these basic concepts in mind, let us venture out to seek truth in answer to the question, "are there exceptions?"

Those Who Have Never Heard the Gospel

We must first understand that the Bible is very clear that no salvation exists beyond Jesus Christ and His Gospel. Jesus was very adamant about Him being the way, the truth, and the life:

John 8:24 I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins."

If never hearing the Gospel means that a person is granted an exception and is saved, then the Great Commission where Jesus commanded us to go out into all the world and preach the Gospel¹ seems irrelevant. Following that faulty line of logic, if never hearing means that a person is saved, then we would do good to disobey the commandment of Christ to go into all of the world because if they hear and don't believe, they will be lost where if we had left them alone they would have been saved! The end result of such logic testifies to its errant nature. Rather, the Bible teaches that people must hear and believe the gospel:

Rom 10:13-17 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." **14** But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? **15** And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" **16** But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" **17** So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

The obvious implied answer to Paul's questions here is "they cannot have faith in someone that they have never heard of and they cannot hear without a preacher." To better understand the truth of God's Word in this area, you need to realize three things. First, the Apostle Paul taught that creation testifies to men about the existence of God:

Rom 1:19-20 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. **20** For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. NIV

God's invisible qualities, even "His eternal power and divine nature," are revealed to man by creation. The old saying goes, "if I walk in a field and see a turtle on top of a pole, I know that the turtle had help." The orderliness and complexity of creation testifies to God's existence and testifies that He is one because no committee could have produced such a wonderful world. Indeed, man has yet to travel to a remote jungle and find a tribe of atheists. All men start out worshipping something and that is a testimony to the truth that God exists. Every man's conscience testifies to himself that there is a God that should be worshipped.

The second point that we must grasp is that the Bible teaches that all have an opportunity to interact with God's saving grace:

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. NIV

¹ See Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8.

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This is an important scripture and the key scripture to answer the questions that arise in this area of thought! Technically, there is no one who has never heard of God because creation testifies to His existence. Indeed, He has given every man a “measure of faith.”² Furthermore, every man and woman that has ever lived has been given an opportunity through God’s grace to respond to the call to salvation. Such opportunities have “appeared to all men.”

The third point that we must realize with this is that God rewards those who seek Him.

Heb 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

That is, if a person obeys and responds to the truth that has been revealed to them, then God will and must reveal to them the next step. As long as they keep moving forward and seeking truth, God will keep revealing further and further truth to them. But if they ever stop in their spiritual journey, then God is no longer required to give them a second chance or instruct them further.

By practical example, here is a general overview of the steps that a person must take to be saved:

Believe that God exists	Desire to Worship God	Desire to Worship God in Spirit and in Truth	Hear and believe the Gospel of Christ, how that Jesus is the God of creation	Repent of their sins	Be Baptized in the name of Jesus Christ	Receive the Gift of the Holy Spirit	Live a Holy and Separated Lifestyle as the Bible teaches	Endure in such things until the end
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Even the wildest jungle man has the testimony of creation that God exists and so he must choose to seek to worship that God. If he takes that step, then God will impress upon his conscience that he must seek to please that God and know Him better. If a person never takes that step, then God is not obligated for that person to hear the Gospel of Christ and will be judged in that he never acted upon the grace of God that had appeared to him. If the person does seek to know God better, then somehow someway, God will arrange for him to hear the story of Calvary and be able to believe that Jesus is that God become savior. If the person rejects that revelation, then God is under no obligation to reveal to him the need to repent. But if he does believe in Christ, then God will reveal to him the need to repent of his sins and then if he does that, God will keep revealing to him truth. In this way, the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. Missionaries are replete with stories of people who God miraculously brought into contact with them because they hungered for more of God. Creation testifies to all men that God exists, His grace appears and deals with all men at some time in their life, and He rewards those who seek Him.

If a person dies having never heard of Jesus, then that means that they rejected their conscience when it told them that they needed to seek after God more thoroughly. If a person dies without hearing of the need to be baptized in the name of Jesus, then it means that they never truly repented of their sins and desired to live a life pleasing to God. If a person never hears teaching or instruction on living a holy lifestyle, then it means that they neglected to fulfill one of the steps of God’s gracious plan. The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared in at least its most basic stage to all men, therefore there is no exception to hearing and obeying the Gospel message.

Understanding these principles helps to answer the question of, “what if a person believes and repents and receives the Holy Spirit and goes out and gets killed before getting baptized?” We must first not base our doctrinal beliefs on “what ifs” and philosophical questions that are beyond the Word of God. The Bible never gives an example of this happening and indeed I have yet to hear of it happening. It is possible to receive the Holy Spirit before you are baptized, but if a person receives the gift of the Holy Ghost then God will make sure that they hear of their need to be baptized in the name of Jesus. This is what happened to Cornelius and his family in the 10th chapter of Acts. They received the Holy Spirit and then we find Peter speaking:

² See Romans 12:3.

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Acts 10:47-48a "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Notice that God did not let any of the newly-filled believers die before getting an opportunity to hear of their need for baptism. But if after hearing the commandment, if Cornelius had refused to be baptized, could we honestly say that they were walking by faith, and seeking to please God fully? Because the "grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men," God will not let a person who has received the Spirit of God die before having an opportunity to be baptized, but if they die in such a state because they refused the commandment, then they have rebelled and rejected the gracious hand of God in their life.

Moral and Sincere People

"What about people who are good people and who live moral and wholesome lives and yet do not obey all of the apostolic teachings?" To answer this question we must first realize that nobody is righteous within themselves:

Rom 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Isa 64:6 All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. NIV

Sincerity is not enough, we are commanded to worship God in a very specific way:

John 4:24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

We must realize that how we worship God is even more important than just worshipping Him in the first place. There are atheists that are very moral and law-abiding people. There are pagan people who are very sincere and moral in their lifestyle. Morality, good works, and sincerity do not save us only faith in and obedience to the Gospel of Christ and His word save us. It is possible to be sincere, even in matters of religion, and yet be *sincerely wrong!*

Again, the story of Cornelius' conversion is a great example of the need for good, moral people to fully obey the Gospel of Christ. The Bible says that:

Acts 10:1-2 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, 2 a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.

He was a good man who was very religious to the God of Israel, and yet an angel appeared and commanded that he send for Peter to tell him "everything that was commanded of the Lord."³ The story ends with Cornelius and his household receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, being baptized in the name of Jesus, and Peter staying a while with them to instruct them in holy living.⁴ When God reveals further direction to sincere people, they should like Cornelius respond by moving forward in God!

Those Who Profess Christ

We must understand that simply believing in and professing Christ as Savior is not in itself enough for salvation. The Bible teaches that we must believe *and* obey the Gospel of Christ. "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved."⁵ Jesus taught clearly this concept:

Matt 7:21-23 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' 23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' NIV

³ See Acts 10:30-33.

⁴ See Acts 10:44-48.

⁵ See Mark 16:16.

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Just because a person says that they profess Christ as their savior or who prophesy and preach mightily and even see many miracles in the name of Jesus as a result of their ministry, does not mean that they are saved eternally. Because if they do all of these things and yet do not the will of God, then they will be lost. There are people in cults and in false doctrinal systems that profess to believe in Christ and yet are not saved.

There are also people who preach Christ in all of the truth that they currently know. Jesus taught us not to stop such people, but to keep on doing what we know to do:

Mark 9:38-40 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." 39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 For the one who is not against us is for us.

Jesus instructed His disciples not to stop those who were doing things in His name and yet not following Him, but neither did He instruct His disciples to follow that person! Paul spoke of people who used God for their malicious intent and preached the Gospel for the wrong reasons:

Phil 1:15-18 Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 16 The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice,

We must realize that God can use an imperfect vessel! He can even use the preaching or actions of a person who is not right with God or who does not have full Apostolic truth to help seeking people to take the next step. There are many people in our church who, because of the preaching of a protestant church that was not in complete truth, yet responded in leaving Catholicism and then God used it as a stepping stone to bring them to truth.

It is possible for people to have a certain degree of faith and yet not be born again. Such people will be saved if they continue to follow God into the fullness of truth and they need to be led to the apostolic new birth. Furthermore, God will give them an opportunity to hear such things if they continue to hunger after righteousness. We should not stop them or belittle their previous experience, but we should not join them in their limited knowledge either, but rather lead them to the fullness of the truth; lead them further along in God.

Such people who profess Christ but have yet to obey the full Gospel message are like pre-Pentecost believers. The scripture gives us several examples of people who yet after the day of Pentecost, professed Christ and yet needed to have a Day of Pentecost type experience in their lives. In the 18th chapter of Acts, we find the story of the preacher, Apollos:

Acts 18:24-26 Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. 25 He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. 26 He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

From this narrative, we learn that is possible to be:

1. An eloquent speaker
2. Competent in the knowledge of the scriptures
3. Instructed in the way of the Lord
4. Fervent in the Spirit
5. Teaching accurately things concerning Jesus

And yet not be filled with the Spirit or baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and needing to have "explained to him the way of God more accurately." Such is the condition of many people in this world today.

In similar fashion were the twelve disciples of John the Baptist who Paul ran into in Ephesus in the 19th chapter of Acts. They believed that Christ was the Messiah, but had need to be baptized in the name of Jesus and then:

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Acts 19:6 And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.

The correct response for such people was that they needed to continue on and receive a Day of Pentecost type experience! It could be said that such people who know scripture and profess Christ and even have repented of their sins have been conceived by the Word but have not yet experienced the new birth experience of “being born again of the water and of the Spirit.”⁶ They need to have the ways of God more fully explained to them and to act in obedience in those areas.

Such principles gives us an answer to the question of “what about great historical figures that helped bring us out of Roman Catholicism?” While it was true that men such as John Calvin and Martin Luther helped bring about a revival of truth by their protest against the heresies of the Catholic church, we must realize that they were men and had faults. To believe something simply because a great or influential man believed it is a mistake and a turning aside from the truth of God’s word. Many people during this time, received the gift of the Holy Spirit and received full revelations again of Apostolic truth. Many of the most influential men did questionable things or believed things that were not Biblical truth. For example, Calvin was consenting to the burning at the stake of Michael Servetus who taught that Jesus was the one God of both testaments and that all should be rebaptized in the name of Jesus. In turn, Luther wrote against the “enthusiasts” who had received the gift of the Holy Spirit and had its operation in their services and who claimed that Luther was a “man of word only” and not of spiritual experience. Furthermore, Luther taught that all Anabaptists – who taught the essentiality of water baptism for salvation – were heretics and advocated the killing of all of them, encouraged a certain German ruler to practice bigamy, and thought that the book of James was “a straw epistle” and worthless to Christians. Just because certain men did certain good things that led to many coming back to apostolic truth does not mean that they were perfect or even saved. They will stand before God and give an answer against the Word of God just as all men and women will. To believe something or explain away a principle of scripture simply because a great historical figure did not believe it is a grave mistake!

Infants and the Mentally Handicapped

Let us end this study by considering the eternal fate of infants, small children, and those who never are able to progress beyond the level of understanding of small children. We must first state that the Bible is not explicitly clear in answering these questions and with good reason – there is nothing that we could do about it. We know that the judge of all the earth will do right and we know that we should leave it in His hands. We also know that we should endeavor to teach children at the earliest ages about God and the same applies to those who are mentally handicapped.

Traditionally, religion has answered this query in five ways, only one of which does not contradict scripture or finds hints of scriptural support. Let us quickly survey these answers and whether or not the Bible supports such a view.

1. *They cannot go to heaven due to their sinful nature.*

This is what is taught by the Catholic church and they teach that unbaptized infants cannot go to heaven. They have created a place called “limbo” for them to go to where there is neither pleasure or pain. There is absolutely no scriptural support for this view.

2. *They will be resurrected in the Millennium and given an opportunity to reject or accept salvation.*

The Jehovah’s Witnesses teach this but again there is absolutely no scriptural support for this either.

3. *God will judge infants based on His foreknowledge of what they would have done had they lived.*

This only works if you believe the false doctrine of predestination, so we must not hold to it. Again, this has no Biblical support but is simply another offshoot of errant teaching.

⁶ See John 3:1-8.

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4. *An infant's salvation is based upon their parent's status with God.*

Proponents of this theory cite the fact that the infants of the time of the Flood died because their parents refused to get on the ark. While it is true that children often suffer because of the decisions and consequences of their parents, nowhere in scripture does it say that those children were eternally lost. Another scripture often quoted by people is that of the Apostle Paul:

1 Cor 7:14 For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

This scripture speaks of the Godly influence and blessings that comes from at least one spouse serving God. It does not speak of the children's eternal destiny. It says that the children are "holy" which means separated unto God and does not say that they are "saved."

5. *They will go to heaven into eternal life.*

There are hints at this in scripture. For example, Jesus said:

Matt 19:14 Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." NIV

When God killed the newborn baby of Bathsheba and David that was the result of their adultery, King David ceased his mourning and said this:

2 Sam 12:23 But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."

"I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." As David in the end got things right with God, it would seem that the scriptures hint that infants eventually go to heaven. This is the only theory that does not twist or contradict scripture and for which there seems to be some scriptural support.

The Bible also hints of an "age of accountability." "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved."⁷ A person must be old enough or of mental maturity to reach a place where they can for themselves hear the Gospel message and believe it and act upon it with their own faith. The Bible does not define what this age of accountability is because it is probably different for each person. It is possible that some because of mental handicaps will never in their life reach such an age of accountability. We must teach such young children and situations the truth of God's Word and if they reach such a stage where they are moved to want to obey the Gospel, let them do so. If they never reach such an age before their life is through, we must put them in God's hands and trust Him to do what is right.

Conclusion

All other possible exceptions raised by critics fall into the category of a lack of understanding about key scriptural principles. For example, the thief on the cross was a special case with Christ being both his sacrifice and priest but was still saved under Law. God may have fulfilled the Law in a surprising way but the basic tenants of that era were still met. Likewise the woman caught in the act of adultery was saved under Mosaic law. After the Day of Pentecost, there is no applicable story that could be construed as an "exception." I end by reminding you of the first verse we read:

Heb 2:3a how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

The scripture answers every possible scenario dreamt up by men as to be an exception and it is clear that there are no exceptions. But even if there were, you and I are not that exception – let us do all that God's Word clearly commands us to do!

⁷ See Mark 16:16.